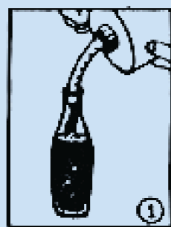


ESSAYS AGAINST PUBLISH ING



jamie berrout

essays
against
pub-
lishing
jamie
berrout

Essays Against Publishing, Jamie Berrouit (2020)

Designed & Published by the author

A free pdf version of this text is available to readers at
patreon.com/desdeotromar

Against Publishing:
A Letter to Trans Women Writers
May 2019

All of us understand that this world is out to destroy trans women. It's the reality we face not just every time we leave the house but also in our homes, on the internet, in just about every text and image we are bombarded with. We understand that the world around us is built on a culture of death, that order is imposed through violences seen and unseen, and it isn't just politicians or the police or the people at the DMV who would show you the door if you tried to update your ID without jumping through their hoops. It's damn near everyone, because most everyone finds it advantageous to treat trans women badly—every stare, every slur, every single rule that makes it harder for us to live makes it easier for them to maintain those arbitrary (but clearly colonial in origin) lines known as the gender binary. For them to feel disgust at the presence of a trans woman or the thought of their kids being trans must also mean that they feel relief at our absence, a sense of sureness, normalcy, security in their actions. That's not to mention the meanings that gender has in the broader social and legal system, how it functions to hold the ongoing settler colonial project together in this country.

I think in general we can all agree on that. We would say to

everyone who is invested in the gender binary to get their shit together and fight alongside us to tear it out of the law and the collective imagination. It's the only thing that makes sense—we need an immediate, wholesale disavowal of the gender binary on everyone's part so that trans women can live.

But, let's face it, these demands seem outlandish to the general public. The colonial project has burrowed its way into all our hearts. What, are they not supposed flip a coin to assign their kids a gender and a name at birth anymore? And how is anyone going to know what to wear, how to speak, or gesture, or look at anyone else without the gender binary mediating all those countless social interactions? Absolutely everything around us is gendered, has been subjected to gender.

What we're demanding is for others to turn their world upside down. Granted, we're asking them to do so to keep trans women (and others) alive and to keep themselves from being complicit in mass murder. Still, it's a big fucking leap. But I think we need to ask ourselves whether it's possible for the cis-gender public to divest from binary gender outside of or without a broader movement against colonization which reimagines our relationships with people and the land.

What I want to say to trans women writers is that we're no different. Because we lose sight of the ways that our work is formed out of and furthers colonization. We forget the ways all of this is bound together: how trans womanhood (the picture of a trans woman; who is seen and allowed to be one) is constructed out of race/racism, which itself also constructs colonial gender; how Trans Literature has been and continues to be a white supremacist project, which is also colonization, also gender; how publishing is built on the capitalist logic of merit, hierarchies of worth and superiority, which are also constitutive of the colony, of gender.

Publishing after all is a culture of death. It is rooted in the fascist notion that there are people who deserve to write and those who don't; that it is good and well for editors to determine

who gets to write and be published based on a writer's proximity to whiteness, their social class and level of education, their ability (in contrast to disability; ableism too is fundamental to publishing) to overwork themselves and create a nice product that fits into their capitalist model, and their willingness to perform literariness and craft, all of which are arbitrary, racist ways of determining what is proper and what is improper, human and less than human. Where tech culture presumes a right to use the land and sees it as a resource to be exploited, publishing culture presumes a right to filter through people and their narratives, it sees every person as a resource to be exploited, whether as a source of books, book purchases, or book material. (I'll leave the matter of how publishing also presumes a right to use the land and exploits it in an endless, disastrous expansion of the printed and digital word for another essay.)

When we publish we join ourselves to a machine that reproduces racism and transmisogyny; that since its model is based on the creation of hierarchies of humanity and worth cannot help but reproduce those hierarchies even when marginalized people are in charge. Whether we publish through the Big 5 publishing companies or their imprints or through small presses, the exclusionary, meritocratic policies and racist book catalogs we fit ourselves into are the same, the only difference is in the degree of harm that's done. It's easy to see the fault with a publisher like HarperCollins, which doesn't give writers a shot of contorting themselves into their ranks unless they have an agent (and having agent representation is a function of race and class), which continues to publish an overwhelmingly white catalog of books that sustains the dominant neoliberal ideology while also denying jobs and equal publishing opportunities to marginalized people.

Small presses themselves are just as exclusionary and supportive of the status quo in their own ways. Rather than a team of editors, it may be a single editor which selects a book's racist cover art, which publishes and pays only their white MFA

friends, which gleefully attends the notoriously racist writer's conference and poses no critique of it all. To be published even in a small press that barely pays its writers almost has as a requirement for the writer to have a writing degree. To be published through a small press, a writer doesn't only need to have written a book but also needs to have had time to have written that book and then spent months searching for presses at which to publish (often having to pay to enter contests for a chance to earn mere consideration), all without sharing the book online or, god forbid, trying to sell it independently to earn a little cash. The same goes for publishing in literary magazines—these are inhuman presses, inhuman policies which cannot be survived except by those with profound structural advantages and/or profound luck.

The fantasy that justifies it all goes like this: the publishing houses and presses perform the function of safeguarding literature and the reading public by selecting the very best manuscripts for publication out of so many mediocre submissions.

But every part of that is false. There is no such thing as the best manuscripts, there is only taste—and if taste dictates that books by comfortable white MFA's with liberal politics and their vacillating peers are what deserves to be read then... yikes. And doesn't it sound familiar, this idea that if a writer works hard, does everything right, and waits long enough that opportunities will open up, that through competition the best among us will rise to the top? It should, because that's the fiction of meritocracy that every neoliberal politician, every Republican and Democrat, has been selling to us for the past half century in the face of growing inequality and the increasingly obvious incompatibility of settler colonial capitalism with human life. Even as climate change destroys the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable around the world we hear the Obamas and Trumps tell us that the system is fundamentally fair, that if you're being ground to dust at this moment it is your own fault.

Publishing at every level reinforces the fiction of meritocracy, which “has become the key means of cultural legitimation for contemporary capitalist culture” (Jo Littler), which “is one of the foundational and erroneous ideals of white supremacy” (Brittany Cooper). You must have heard this before too, that if your manuscript gets rejected by a publisher you just need to make more revisions and submit to more places, that you need to go back and work on your craft if your poems aren’t being picked up by literary magazines, that the reason *Poetry* and *The Paris Review* are so well respected and exclusive is that they publish only best work (and not because they’re run by rich white racists who have rigged this entire publishing thing). Which is to say there is another option for struggling writers: to end publishing and capitalism, to begin to build our own alternatives.

We see the limits of what is possible in publishing through the project of *Bettering American Poetry* (*BAP*), where the impulse is to diversify, broaden the net, on a search for those of us deserving of recognition yet deemed inhuman/improper by publishing. It’s the same murderous, meritocratic project of publishing but with a brown face. But see, this is what the most brilliant minds of the small press world can come up with: a who’s who of exceptional gays and POC guided by that same filtering logic in the way it limited submissions of *Bettering American Poetry* (volumes 1 & 2) to writers who had been already published, presumably by a literary magazine or small press, in the previous year. Or rather, there were no actual submissions; the editors of *BAP* only considered published poetry which was nominated for inclusion. It should go without saying that those were impossible barriers for the vast majority of poor and marginalized writers to overcome.

And looking at a list of writers who were published in the two volumes of *BAP*, we can see that having an MFA and numerous previous publications, including full length books, was essentially a requirement for being included. In a 2015 state-

ment, the editors of *BAP* wrote, “We wish to challenge the idea that a few gatekeepers should oversee the publishing order each year...”; but that’s what they did at a small scale, they kept everyone who couldn’t afford (or survive) a graduate degree out, they left out everyone who couldn’t afford to write a book or read literary magazines. They claimed to be against hierarchies, but only acted to build a new hierarchy where they were no longer losing out to whites and cis people who by their own measure (craft, inventiveness, etc) were, well, less capable.

I didn’t mean to write more than a passing sentence on *BAP*, and my intention is not to single them out, because they have done no worse than any other publication and they do deserve some credit for having gotten together so many of those POC poet of color names. The problem is that they stopped right at that point. *BAP* gathers all of these exceptional marginalized writers (and I say “exceptional” in the strictly pejorative sense) but it never looks to the masses from which they were plucked; and the same meritocratic move they pull in order to assemble the ranks of *BAP* volumes 1 & 2 is what tokenized them in the first place and what they were reacting against in creating their project.

But I’m not dwelling in these contradictions in order to apply reason and resolve them. The point is to show the need to organize and build systems towards accountability and start taking collective action to reject meritocracy, end publishing, and destroy this pillar of capitalism and settler colonialism.

To this end, I’ll wrap up by laying out some actions that the writers and editors of *BAP* might have taken in working to carry out their mission statement. The first is that they should have worked against the de facto requirement of an MFA to being published by, if not outright barring submissions from graduate degree holders, at least having expressly prioritized first publishing non-MFA writers before considering those with the degree. Such a move would have made it impossible to limit

submissions/nominations to poems that had been published in presses or lit mags, but that's for the better and specifically so for writers as marginalized as trans women of color who can't afford to read lit mags or small press books, much less submit to them and push their work through despite the racism and transmisogyny of their editors. Again, it is profoundly difficult for trans women of color to be able to find the time to write and to even see themselves as the kind of writer who can have a place in lit mags and presses.

BAP could have done something similar to what I've been doing as editor of a booklet series that publishes only trans women writers, which is at the first sign that only a certain kind of whiter, ultra-educated, exceptional writer was fitting into their policies and submissions process, their editors should have reached out to writers working at the margins of the margins, writers who are sharing their work on blogs and social media and self published books, who face a double rejection not just from institutional white editors but also from the queer/POC indie literary scene which aspires to institutional power through merit, and worked with them.

Having undermined the logic of publishing through radically inclusive revisions to their policies *BAP* might have made a series of credible demands: against literary awards and contests as naked meritocracy and a rigged game of lottery; against the MFA as a requirement to publication; against barring previously blogged/posted or self-published writing from being considered for publication; and for all presses and publications to provide free digital copies of their texts to readers who couldn't afford access otherwise; for paying publications to prioritize publishing groups as marginalized and neglected as Black trans women writers and for Black trans women specifically to be published and reviewed far more widely than they currently are; for presses to seek out poor/marginalized writers who lack access to publishing or even writing and to create the

conditions necessary for them to write and be heard, such as by advance payment or paying them higher amounts by slightly increasing the price of texts which are only accessible by relatively well-off readers anyway; for sustained, material support of alternative forms of publication expressly against competition, which unlike lit mags, will not be burdened with inhuman policies and vague goals but will be created by writers at the margins of the margins and double as mutual aid projects with the goal of improving the life chances of both its readers and writers (say, a print arts quarterly by/for trans women of color; a monthly Black trans poetry newsletter/booklet series/critical journal); and for the necessity and legitimacy of groups to continue pressing for fundamental change like, say, a Union of Trans Readers Who Cannot Afford to Read Any of These Trans Books (which might demand that presses attach free PDFs of their books to their sites so poor trans women can access them) or a Union of Trans Women Writers (which might demand increased and quicker payment to freelance trans women writers from media publications and facilitate the transfer of funds from white trans women, given access to work and higher pay by white supremacist institutions, to trans women of color who are under attack by those institutions.)

But it is not for me to say what specific actions should end publishing or what will be the shape of things after it. That's for the coming unions and collectives and decentralized networks to decide—ask your friends, find your comrades, list your demands—they should be here any time.

The End of the Poetry Foundation

*A Letter to the 2019 Ruth Lilly
and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg
Poetry Fellowship Finalists*

August 2019

It isn't fair. You've done the work. You've finally been recognized for it. You've got a chance to make some real money now. Twenty-five thousand eight hundred dollars—twice as much as I've ever made in a year and I'm 31. You've earned it.

And yet. Maybe you've heard people talking about Ruth Lilly, how she made her fortune (all those hundreds of millions of dollars, some of which she left to the Poetry Foundation in the form of stocks) by being in the family that owns the pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly. Maybe you've heard about Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg—well, there's not much about her online, but her son made a lot of money managing a hedge fund and he gave the Poetry Foundation some of that cash in her name. Maybe you've heard the Poetry Foundation has a long history of being a home for the worst imperialists and financiers, with such luminaries as their current president Henry Bienen, ex-CIA man and former banker who helped usher in the Great Recession over at Bear Stearns (See: Isobel Bess's work on Bienen and the Poetry Foundation for more).

But what does that have to do with you?

You've found success. They don't understand how rare that is for someone who's been through everything you've been through. This fellowship could change things for you and the community you're fighting for. They don't understand everything you'll be able to do with this fellowship. Besides, all of us do things to earn a paycheck that might be problematic—ever

heard of capitalism? You're not the first person to win this kind of award; for such a long time it was only boring white poets that had a shot at Poetry money, and isn't it time for boring queer and POC poets to cash in? So no one gets to tell you whether or not you deserve this. They don't understand, even this whole thing of questioning your taking the fellowship is problematic in itself—they've got a bias; yes, it must be that they're jealous of you, these people who stand on the sidelines shouting at you without having done the work. It's all very ugly.

You need to survive. Yes, you have a teaching job. You have a second teaching job. You have an editing job. You do readings and so on. You write. You have too many jobs, in fact, and this fellowship will make life easier for you—and for your family.

But there goes that feeling of doubt again. The money that promises to make your life easier—what if someone else's life was made harder so that comfort could be given to you? What about their families? The hundreds of unionized janitors at Eli Lilly who were forced to risk a protest campaign a few years ago because they'd been paid poverty wages for so long or the victims of Eli Lilly's brazen double digit insulin price hikes (and price fixing with its competitors) who chanted at a protest, "Your drug prices are homicide!", the same company whose stocks the Poetry Foundation seems to still be sitting on, generating more and more wealth each year when they could be divesting, giving back the money to those it was stolen from...

Enough of that.

You're doing important work. Let's talk about that. The fact that you've been named as a finalist for this honor, this thing that everyone wants and only the best of the best will ever get a chance at having, that's incredibly validating. It means you've been doing the right things, you've persevered even when it was clear that someone like you shouldn't be in the room. Here you are breaking barriers again because that's what you do. Nothing can stop you. If you want to take the Ruth Lilly Fellowship,

then why the hell not? If you want to shake the hand of a former CIA man who perhaps helped destabilize governments and murder people from the country you or your parents (and my parents too) or your friends are from, who the hell is going to stop you? If you wanted to be a CIA agent or a cop and oversee and eliminate Black and brown people on behalf of the US government, well that's your right. Right? Because if it's not you taking that salary or that fellowship money, it's just going to be someone else. It might as well be you. The one who deserves it. You don't like it any more than anyone else.

Except. What if... none of us takes Poetry's blood money anymore? Aha ha, just kidding. Unless... maybe we could break the Poetry Foundation and undermine and survive racial capitalism through direct action and mutual aid?

You're not sure.

What's wrong with success? Well, that's the thing. Any success that is achieved at the expense of other people's lives, that's no success at all. None of us want to be the cop that earns a pension after a lifetime of beating on people of color and disabled people and poor people and so on. Let's agree on that. None of us want to be the ICE/BP agent that tears a family apart by literally separating a mother from her child and putting them into separate cages. The success of a cop that moves through the ranks by being proficient at following orders that amount to an anti-Black, colonial project of mass murder, that's not success. That's violence. That's terror. That's everything you're afraid will tear out your own throat as you walk down a street where you feel out of place. Isn't it strange?

There is violence behind publishing, also. There is the violence of the non profit that launders capitalism's bloodiest money and legitimizes the practice of taking years of life from the many and distributing a portion of that as life-giving assistance (fellowships or jobs or charity) for a deserving few.

There is the violence of the fantasy of meritocracy which is used to justify the white supremacist, capitalist logic of pub-

lishing and its direction towards the subjugation of people of color and the poor, among others, as a permanent underclass. For publishing is rooted in and reproduces in every reader the idea that only certain people (richer, closer to whiteness, well-credentialed, able-bodied and mentally suitable, more accommodating of the state of things) deserve to write and be published and heard. The very practice of determining who is deserving of a fellowship or publication is itself violent. This curation must be violent when it surveys the world at a moment in time and regurgitates that same unequal world year after agonizing year.

Finally, there is the violence of those who are admitted into the institutions of publishing, who gain by it, and identify themselves with those institutions (of white supremacy) so strongly that they lash out upon hearing critiques of those institutions. Which is also the violence of keeping tabs on people, listening in on conversations among dissidents and reporting back who is good and willing, who will never be fit for entrance into these institutions, and who deserves punishment. This violence is the violence of the kapo, the prisoner who works for the jailers as a guard or functionary or supervisor with the power of life and death over other prisoners. Sound familiar?

It's tough.

On one hand, being a finalist for the fellowship makes you feel seen. It's about more than money. It's an acknowledgement by people above you, people with real power. It means something that you are on this list—you're going places, that's what this says about you.

Though, where exactly is that?

What I'm saying is all this sounds like the plot of a horror film. They see you, but it's only because they have a purpose for you. They, with their hundreds of millions, refuse to see all the people whose lives could quite literally be saved if they had a piece of that money. But rather than give their fortune to poor

poets surviving on food stamps, poets struggling to retire from sex work, queer and trans poets of color who will never get into MFA programs, homeless poets, incarcerated poets, young poets of the immigration camps (that is, every last child in those camps), and rid themselves of the horrible burden of inaction in the face of so much suffering—they give you the thinnest slice of that money as a fellowship instead.

Why? Because your participation helps them justify this nightmare scheme. They could not have a 20 million dollar headquarters and millions more in real estate holdings if they didn't have the support of respected and promising poets. They wouldn't be able to increase their fortune every year and still (still!) raise more money in the form of 100% tax-deductible donations if they didn't have your support. They wouldn't be able to continue promoting a neoliberal, palatable, god-awful version of poetry and suppress radical, subversive, indignant voices if they didn't have your support.

They intend to possess you.

I'm not going to tell you what to do. This is not a plea for help for any particular cause. I am not asking for a portion of the blood money about to fall into your hands. I speak to you from the common grave—my work in organizing with other trans women writers towards revolution will continue no matter what you decide to do. But I want you to know the Poetry Foundation will be brought to an end within our lifetimes. The institutions that are fixtures of the literary and publishing scenes in America will end, and this is not a reference to climate collapse or some inevitable crisis. What I mean is there are many of us who are fighting for the end of this world in which you and the Poetry Foundation are finding success. We know we will not survive unless this world is transformed, so we are in a struggle to the death. You can have your fellowship. You can have your success. But it won't last. And if you won't help us tear these institutions apart, soon enough you'll find

the floor has disappeared beneath you.

What remains in the end is you and your fear. The thought that you cannot afford to miss this opportunity, whatever the cost. And if that is indeed the fear that stops you from doing something—organizing, rejecting success and meritocracy, pursuing radical, non-hierarchical forms of publishing, kindly plucking Henry Bienen's eyes from their sockets—eventually you'll realize you were afraid of the wrong thing all along.

**Practical Notes
for DIY Publishing
/ The Abolition
of Publishing
via the Anti-Press
Nov/Dec 2019**

1. Submissions;
2. Cover Design;
3. Page Layout;
4. Printing and Layout;
5. Payment, Royalties, Rights
6. The Abolition of Publishing

1. Submissions

a. The first step is issuing a call for submissions and/or directly contacting writers to solicit their work. I've been doing both for the booklet series on social media where I already had a presence, but especially with thinking about abolition (the end of prisons and the end of the publishing industry and hierarchies of worth) it's important to go beyond our existing networks and try to reach other writers where they are, especially those who currently aren't able to practice writing due to poverty, isolation, or other constraints.

But we can break through these barriers and help to break down prisons by getting free copies of our work to incarcerated people and finding ways to invite them to publish and collaborate with those of us on the outside. I'm working with the Women's Prison Book Project (based in Minneapolis) to distribute free copies of the booklet series and am in contact with other groups about increasing our reach with incarcerated trans people and making it possible for them to contribute to and get paid through the booklet series. If you're with a new publication or have been wanting to work towards abolition, a good place to start might be contacting your local organizations that send free books to people in prison (google search: books+through+bars; prison+book+project) and your local chapter of Black and Pink.

Also, if poor writers can't afford to read your publication—if you're not offering free copies in forms that are actually accessible to people; for example, it's not ideal telling poor readers to ask for a copy if they want one badly enough, that's putting a burden on them—they're effectively going to be shut out of the submissions process.

b. On “Previously Published” Work

Since the booklet series is a monthly publication, we’ve had to plan each issue a few months in advance of its release to make sure the texts would be ready to go out to readers on time (the series is funded by subscriptions paid through patreon).

But there’s definitely a tension between the editor’s desire for certainty (and time to create a unique design) in asking to receive texts from writers well in advance of publication and, on the other hand, the writer’s need to be paid for their work as close as possible to the period in which they’re producing the writing so they can pay their bills. The booklet series has mostly been able to avoid these timing issues because almost all the work we’ve released in print has been previously published by the authors on blogs or as zines or ebooks. This was a conscious and significant decision.

Publications that bar the submission of previously published work really screw over poor writers who can’t afford to produce new work specifically for them and whose practice of writing (and building community) is more likely to involve sharing their writing on social media as they produce it, especially since they’ve been historically shut out of publishing because of this and other punitive policies. If the booklet series didn’t welcome the submission of previously published work, we would have had to shut down a long time ago. It’s not enough to say that the policy of barring previously published work is a joke because there’s no practical way for editors to enforce it—we need to see this is part of a broader effort in publishing to create a culture of exclusion, manipulation, punishment, and control which only benefits those with power or proximity to it.

c. Simultaneous Submissions

The same way that radical presses should allow the submission of previously published work, so should they also allow simultaneous submissions. The policy of a lot of serious journals/magazines is to prohibit writers from submitting the same piece to different outlets while the writer waits to hear back about whether they'll be published. The idea, in the minds of these editors, is that if a writer submits to journals A, B, and C and all three decide to publish their piece then two of those editors will be awfully disappointed—they'll either have to spend a bit more time selecting alternative stories to run or face the horror of publishing the same story. So they bar simultaneous submissions.

But the reality of this policy is that it works greatly to the benefit of writers with money who have the time to produce more work and rigorously keep track of their submissions. Poor writers can't afford to publish under a system that requires them to, first, spend months writing a story they want to sell to a journal, then submit to journal A, wait four months to get a rejection, submit to journal B, wait three months for a rejection, submit to journal C, wait six months and never hear back, and then keep trying.

d. The Slush Pile

The slush pile refers to the mountain of unsolicited submissions that presses/publications usually end up with when they send out a general call for submissions—it's nice when publications that pay writers, even very prestigious ones, will allow anyone to send them work during their open submissions period and that they promise to give everyone's work equal consideration, judging them solely on their merit. That's the fantasy.

But what usually happens is there will be two tracks for publication: one for writers who the editors reach out to directly to solicit their work (often people they know) and another for unknown writers whose work ends up in the slush pile, where it will absolutely not receive a fair hearing. Rather, since there are so many pieces to sort through, editors will often divide the slush pile of submissions into sections, each select a handful of their favorites from the section they read, and then together decide on which of those gets published. That is, a writer who submits a story and waits around for months to hear back is just waiting for some asshole with a writing degree to give their story a glance, decide whether or not it speaks to them, whether it feels urgent or important enough, and send back a generic email.

But there are ways for anti-presses to avoid the slush pile. Issuing general calls for submission for the booklet series—inviting all trans women to send pitches or submit their work—resulted in a submissions pool that was overwhelmingly white and overwhelmingly consisted of trans women who already had a shot of publishing with other venues (because they had writing degrees or a list of prior publications)¹. It was more work than I could give

1 It's not that the number of white trans women outweighs that of trans women of color - these two populations in the US should be roughly even. It's social causes that result in the pool of submissions (when calling for any trans women to send in their work) being overwhelmingly white. Just to name a few: TWOC face higher rates of unemployment and poverty so they don't have as much time to write and seek publication; TWOC are and have been underrepresented in published trans literature and seeing this exclusion discourages them from trying to participate in publishing projects; and even when TWOC do manage to create incredible texts their early work receives less critical engagement and support than that of white trans women, so there's a significant number of TWOC who are already doing this work but remain outside of any publishing scene where calls for submissions don't reach them. So it's important to make interventions that help TWOC have a chance to participate: paying competitive rates relative to other publications/publishers, having flexible submission guidelines, and reaching out directly to

fair consideration and pass judgment on even if that was something I had any interest in—I don't. But when our submissions policy changed to limiting submissions to trans women of color and specifically inviting Black and Indigenous trans women to contribute (groups which are severely underrepresented in publishing, even in contrast to white trans women), there was essentially no pool of submissions; I would only hear from one or two interested writers each month, and I've been able to publish every one of those writers who submitted work after that without having to think about their merit—all of those who are most vulnerable and in greatest need in our communities should be given a chance to publish if they want it; merit is a lie, the notion of genius is eugenics.

The next time I open up submissions for the series in 2020, I think I'll specifically call for submissions from trans women of color and any poor/unemployed trans women—that might provide a better balance between receiving so many submissions that work by women of color gets lost in the mix and receiving so few submissions that I've sometimes had to rush to solicit writing when I haven't had anyone lined up for an issue in advance.

Another way to manage the slush pile, which I think is what Paint Bucket does well, is to be transparent about the kind of consideration each piece will receive—maybe it's just the one editor reading through a poem a couple of times and deciding on the spot if they'll run it; that's cool, but *say that* and be ready for readers to complain if you start fucking up—and commit to getting back to writers within a day or two of their submission. Yes, this would do away with the high stakes and fake competitiveness that presses like to cultivate, but at least this way writers could go on with their lives because they wouldn't be left

TWOC are probably among the most important.

waiting around in limbo.

e. Submission Fees

It should go without saying but submission fees are another barrier that only benefits writers who already have every advantage. Submission fees are fundamentally unethical, and so are fees to submit work to a writing contest. Offering to cover the fees for poor writers to submit work is like giving poor kids waivers to take the SAT's for free, which is something my public school did—it was a nice gesture but it still forced kids from one of the poorest counties in the country to take a racist test and compete (the word has no meaning here) against kids whose parents could afford tutors, practice tests, better schools, etc. Even if you covers writers' fees, the editors' evaluations of their work are still going to be made under a white supremacist value system and against other writers who can afford the training to win under that value system.

That's not to say writers can't pool money together in collaboration; for some, an alternative to submissions and fees might be for editors and writers to enter directly into partnerships where money and labor is gathered to accomplish the common goal of printing and distributing their own texts and profits are shared among all. It sounds easy enough, but that requires building genuine relationships where risk-sharing and collective action can take place; it can perhaps only be done with friends.

2. Cover Design

a. Designing for the booklet series: once I've received a rough draft of the text from the current month's writer, I start the cover design process. The first step is identify-

ing themes/images from the text that I'll try to represent through art or photography on the cover.

c. I use public domain art (like from the Open Access collection available from the Met Museum) or stock photos with licensing that allows their use in this kind of publication (like unsplash.com).

d. It's important that the search for art and photographs be limited to images that are high resolution (ideally at least a size of 2550 x 3300 pixels or 8.5 by 11 inches at 300 dpi for an image that will span both the front and back covers of one of our booklets; [see this tutorial for more on image quality](#)). A small, low resolution image cannot be made into a larger one at higher quality, and the right quality/size is a requirement for putting the image into print; a low resolution image can look fine on a digital screen but if it is printed on paper it will look pixelated and out of focus.

e. Once I've found the right image(s), I use Adobe Indesign² to design the front and back covers. It's impossible to describe this process here; there's a kind of art to placing the title and author name to the front cover (as well as placing the summary, author bio, or blurbs on the back) in such a color and location on the page that it remains visible against the art you've selected. Lately I've been starting each cover by sketching out various designs

2 The only way to legally start using Adobe Indesign is to pay a monthly licensing fee that will cost you between \$252 and \$500 per year, depending on whether you buy access to just Indesign or the entire Adobe Creative Cloud Suite. No one has that kind of money. If you're interested in using Indesign, please research a safe way to torrent a hacked copy that won't require you to pay any fees. I can't help with this part—honestly just because I haven't torrented anything in years—but ask any of your friends who are good at downloading movies, they'll know what to do.

on scrap paper while looking through design blogs, and then I work from those notes to create some cover drafts in Indesign. Definitely look through the shops/catalogs of presses whose designs you like or browse the shelves of local libraries/bookstores and take pictures of covers you might want to borrow ideas from. Also, the principles of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity are another good place to start; more on that in [this design tutorial](#).

f. The cover design needs to take into account the limitations of your method of printing. There are at least a few different ways this can make a difference.

1. If you're printing the cover on an ordinary home or office printer, whether in black & white or in color, the machine won't be able to print to the edge of the page, so it will leave a white margin (likely 1/2 inch) on every side. This limitation may distort your cover design if you're printing from a PDF unless you make sure you're using the "Actual Size" setting, as opposed to the default which will have your design be shrunk to fit inside the reduced space resulting from the imposition of the white margins.

This printing method has obvious limitations: if you design a cover with art or a photo that spans the entire space of the 8.5 by 11 inch sheet, it's going to feel like the printer is messing up your design by imposing a margin upon it. I recommend researching zine and chapbook cover designs if you want to get a sense for how you might work around this limitation by focusing the design on the center of the page. This is definitely the cheapest and easiest way of printing your covers and can look as good as anything presses with full time designers make if you keep the art/images/text on the cover away from the margins or find a

way to incorporate the margin by printing on cardstock of a color that works with the design.

2. If you're printing on a professional quality printer capable of printing "full bleed", you will be able to print to the edge of the page on your own. Like with #1 above, you'll probably want to purchase thicker paper for the cover (in the US, it would be 80-100lb cardstock; in the UK, 215-270 gsm; the brand Neenah sells cardstock that's available in most office supply stores; for top quality cover cardstock paper with more color options check out French Paper Company.

This printing method is potentially the most expensive because it can quickly use up cartridges of ink if you're using a color printer, like a Canon Pro 100, to print art that spans the entire cover. But it also offers the most control and, in some ways, the least risk—there are always differences between the way a cover design appears on a computer screen and the way it will appear on paper; in my experience, colors usually appear darker or more dull on paper than on the screen. To calibrate my screen when making final adjustments to the colors/contrasts of a cover design, I'll turn down the brightness on the back-light to around fifty percent since that seems to more accurately predict how those colors will look in print. Using this kind of printer, it's always possible to make corrections in your design program and try reprinting, which is more complicated with option #3 below.

3. If you're sending a PDF of your cover design to get the covers made at a local printing shop, which is what I've done for most of the booklet issues, that's likely how you'll get the most professional results.

One thing to consider is that a printing shop will print your 8.5 by 11 inch cover on a larger sheet of paper which will then be cut down to 8.5 x 11, so they'll need you to include a .125 inch bleed (or extra margin) in your design and PDF. That is, you'll have to extend the images or background on your cover into that extra (.125 inch) space to account for the fact there is always some slight variation in the process of the cover sheets being physically cut by the printer. This also means the cover should be designed in such a way that no text comes within .125 to .25 inches of the edge of the (8.5 x 11 inch) page and nothing of importance aligns precisely with the edge of the page since it might be cut off or shift slightly away from the edge.

Also, keep in mind that it will be time-consuming and an additional expense to get a printed "proof" (sample) copy of the cover sent to you by the printing shop, from which you will be able to make adjustments before committing to paying for the full order to be printed. If you skip getting a printed proof, it's entirely possible that you'll have to live with some amount of slight error that could have been corrected with another round of edits and re-printing—however, I usually skip the printed proof because of the time delay and cost, and just try to just take a great amount of care when preparing the cover PDF I send to the printing shop.

You can get an automatic quote from a national printing company like printingcenterusa.com and then compare that with what your order would cost through your local printing shops—call or email them for a quote—which might turn out to be cheaper or more expensive than a large printing co.

3. Page Layout

a. I use Adobe Indesign to do the page layouts for the booklet texts. The layouts can also be done on any word processor or in google docs. The goal is simply to end up with the text arranged in such a way (in terms of font size, leading (line spacing), and margins) that it can be printed in a form that is readable and attractive to readers, so there's a lot of ways to get there. But Indesign is the standard since it allows for a higher level of control than most other software options.

b. I generally try to keep the total length of the booklets to 32 to 44 pages in print (which is equivalent to 8-12 sheets of paper). This is very much a subjective matter, but for the purposes of the booklet series my thinking is that a shorter length would feel too brief (the 32 page total on the lower end includes several pages of front matter: title page, credits, table of contents, etc. So the word count for a 32 page booklet of prose might be something like 7,000 words). And on the upper end, a page count higher than 44 starts to strain the format (the more sheets of paper, the harder they are to physically fold and staple together, and the more ink is used) and it becomes a lot of work for the writer to turn in and be fairly compensated for.

c. The amount of space you have to work with for the layouts is equal to the actual space of the physical sheet of paper you'll be printing on—a sheet measures 8.5 by 11 inches in landscape mode (positioned horizontally). Whatever design program or word processor you use, I'd recommend working on the text with facing pages (also called spreads) to make sure the elements on the left and right hand pages will be perfectly aligned. This can be

done by dividing the letter-size, landscape page into two halves or columns, each measuring 8.5 by 5.5 inches—in Adobe Indesign, you can turn on “Facing Pages” under File>Document Setup. (See the template at the end of this section.)

d. The settings as far as margins, gutter, and the placement of page numbers, how many lines should fit on the page, and typeface/font size are all highly subjective and likely to change according to the genre of the text and the style of the publication. Poetry might call for larger margins than prose, for example, in order to focus the sparse lines of text more tightly to the center of the page, forming a more stark contrast with the wider areas of blank space. The usual settings for a prose issue of the booklet series are the following:

Margins: .66 inches on the left and right sides and the top of the page; 1 inch on the bottom of the page.

(The page number here is located within the larger margin at the bottom of the page, about half an inch from the bottom edge of the page and aligned on the left hand corner as far to the left as the text goes and the reverse on the right hand corner: aligned to the right as far as the text goes.)

Gutter (interior margin between left & right hand pages): .66 inches to the left of center. .66 inches to the right of center.

Number of lines to the page: about 33

Number of words to each line: about 10 (apparently 66 characters per line is ideal for making a text readable)

Typeface: Adobe Garamond Pro

Font size: 12pt

Leading (line spacing): 15pt

4. Printing & Binding

a. Once the layout of the text pages is finished in Indesign (or whichever program you use), you'll need to export it as a PDF—in Indesign this would be as consecutive “pages” rather than facing “spreads”.

b. Then open the PDF and print the pages using the “Booklet” setting (rather than the default setting of printing to “Size”. Any ordinary printer (preferably a laser printer since they're more efficient than inkjet printers for printing large amounts of copies) is capable of printing the text pages. However, it will save a lot of time and effort to be using a printer that can do duplex printing (automatically to print on the front and back of a sheet); otherwise, you'll have to feed every sheet twice. The printer I use for the text pages is a Brother HL-L2370DW which does auto duplex printing; each toner cartridge my printer uses costs about \$15 and lasts enough to print around 150 copies of a 36 page booklet; the copy paper needed to print 150 copies of that booklet (1350 sheets) is about \$20 if you're using nice paper—that comes out to a total cost of 2 cents for each printed sheet (front and back), significantly cheaper than what it would cost at a library or copy shop.

c. The last step is to fold the text pages for each booklet, fold the booklet covers separately, then flatten them out (with the cover placed over the pages) and staple them together using a long reach stapler.

d. When the booklet series started we released editions of 125 copies, and now we're up to making 175 copies

of each issue—over time I’ve gotten better at making the copies, but there’s definitely an upper limit to how many I think I’ll be able to print and bind each month just because of the time and effort it takes. I don’t think the series will be able to release editions of over 200 copies unless I build something like a workshop space where another editor can come in and help with the labor of putting the copies together.

5. Payment, Royalties, Rights

a. On author payments

The booklet series started out paying \$200 to each writer (who contributed a chapbook/zine length work; or, in other words, a text that would be around 28-40 booklet pages in total). We’re currently paying \$350 per booklet writer for the same amount of work. I think anything above \$200 USD starts to be a competitive rate in the US as far as publishing a small edition of work of this length.

Ideally every writer would be paid in advance—that’s definitely a goal I’m working towards along with continuing to increase the author payments. In terms of when writers are paid relative to their submission/deadline and publication: the current practice of the booklet series is to pay the writer within a week of their work being released in print, which is a couple of weeks after their final drafts are due (usually no more than a few months from the time they submit a partial/rough draft or initially pitch a text they’d like to write or complete for the series).

But there’s a wide variety in the practices of publications (even publications with tons of money) related to when they actually make their payments, so for an editor to

even just be able to tell writers the date they'll be paid or when relative to the submission deadline is a good start. Even if the payment date is several months after the final text is sent to the editor, if that information is on a call for submissions writers will be able to plan ahead and better decide if they can afford to pursue publishing.

b. Royalties

If you're going to be publishing often, like on a monthly basis, I'd recommend not doing royalties because they'll quickly get very complicated; a lot of your time will be spent sorting out and sending what might only be small payments. From a writer's perspective, it's also better to be paid the entire amount of what their work will earn from the beginning rather than have those payments be made over along period of time in an unpredictable way.

In general, it's better for everyone involved in this small-scale publishing if instead of making royalty payment in the future, a publisher simply pays its writers an amount that takes into account the future sales that would have otherwise been paid out as their royalties. So if a press is printing an edition of 300 copies of an author's chapbook and there's a profit of \$2 on each sale (after accounting for all expenses including paying the editorial staff) that should be going back to the author in a total sum of \$600 once all copies are sold; instead of sending the author monthly royalty payments over the course of the following year or two, the press could just pay the author their \$600 up front and recover that shortfall by selling the 300 copies (or, perhaps, agree to pay the author \$300 after the first month the chapbook is on sale, then another \$300 after the chapbook has been on sale for three months, if it means the press will avoid paying the author by borrow-

ing money), either absorbing the cost while those sales are underway through the use of fund-raising / pre-sales / by incorporating the need to have these author-payment funds into their budget (if the press raises the price of each chapbook it sells by .50 cents and it publishes six authors each year in the same form of edition, then over time it can build up a significant pool of funds to use to pay its authors up front).

There's another option that's even easier, which is essentially what the booklet series does: for a press to only publish editions of a small enough size that they know they'll be able to sell very quickly. With a subscription model, it's possible for a press/journal to know how many copies will be sold (or rather paid for) immediately upon release and to estimate how many more can be sold soon after and then tailor the size of the editions they publish to that immediate demand. In the example above, if the press had instead printed an edition of 150 and estimated they'd be able to sell nearly all of them within three months, then beforehand they could ask the author if they'd agree to be paid in full three months after the work is released. This way the author knows when they'll be paid; and the press doesn't run the risk of paying to print more copies than it's able to sell. The press and author always have the option of agreeing to print another edition after that if more readers want copies; though they might strike a different arrangement for this second edition: the author might agree to offer to forgo a portion of their profits or delay receiving them for, say, half a year if it means a larger edition can be printed and their work can remain "in print", available to readers throughout the course of the year and perhaps beyond.

c. Rights/Contracts

I haven't been doing contracts to clarify the copyright situation for the booklet series, but that is ideal to make sure everyone involved knows what is and isn't being asked of them in publishing together. What I tell the writers published in the series is that I'm not asking for any rights beyond the permission to publish a single edition of x amount of copies. So the writers retain all rights to their work when they publish with us. The editions we publish are relatively small (currently 175 copies) so there aren't many copies that remain after the patreon subscription copies, author copies, and donated copies are sent out; depending on what the writer prefers, the leftover copies from that printing are either sent to them or sold to raise funds for the booklet series.

The copyright situation starts to get complicated if you as a publisher are trying to limit the author's control over the text in some way or exert control beyond publishing a limited print run; like there are many established publications that seek to constrain the writer from re-publishing their work within a certain time span from when their work is released by the publication. But that seems really unnecessary. The power disparities between writers (who are seeking work and trying to make money) and editors/publications (who have money/work to give) is such that any restrictions along these lines by publications are inherently scummy.

In general, I think the copyright situation with each writer can be cleared up with a simple statement or conversation about the matter. A journal or magazine could start here: *In exchange for a payment of \$50, our press asks for permission to publish your poems in our magazine in a*

single edition of 250 copies and to host your poems at our website where they will be freely available to the public until our publication shuts down or you ask us to take them down. We're not asking for any rights beyond that, e.g. you'll be free to pursue publishing your poem with any other publication and to use it in any way at any time without having to consult us.

6. The Abolition of Publishing

The abolition of publishing will require not just the end of the dizzyingly ghoulish institutions that constitute it—those whose very existence relies on and reinforces hierarchies of race, class, ability; which like other arms of the settler colonial state, have as their primary activity not the creation of art or community but the production, maintenance, and management of hierarchies that order the colony—we will also have to build a wide range of alternatives, based on mutual aid, cooperation, and collective ownership. The name for this range of alternatives is the anti-press.

Why not pursue these aims through publishing as it now exists, whether by pursuing reforms or seeking some transformation? Publishing has had its chance, and it has failed the people at every turn because it is so deeply interconnected with the university, with finance, with non-profits, and with the neoliberal notions of meritocracy and progress, which form the reverse side of the prison in their project of judging who is worthy of life and free movement through inclusion and who, being excluded, must face punishment.

Even the most valiant efforts at skirting or subverting capitalism from within publishing through its smallest, most independent and experimental venues, have failed to

do more than put a kinder face on their operation within (and extending, rebranding) the genocidal system of settler colonialism. The proudly “noncommercial” forty volume Pushcart Prize is as overwhelmingly stocked with middle-class (or aspiring) graduates of writing programs as the three volume series of *Bettering American Poetry*; the difference between them is that the former pool of writers is whiter, straighter, better connected, and better paid than the latter, but the editors of both series would tell you that there is such a thing as good writing, literature of a higher quality, attentive to craft, that they know a deserving writer when they see one, that there is such a thing as literary genius and it must be celebrated.

It’s not only that the publishing institutions have failed us, but that the people who have been collecting checks from these institutions—our apparent peers, those exceptional ones who remember us only when speaking nostalgically of their origins in the dust—have acquiesced to the demand that they keep distance from the rest of us, writers and readers who are shut out of the realm of publishing and whose only experience of publishing is that it has promised us liberation but has been used as a tool of our oppression in every conceivable way. So it isn’t just publishing that we need to break from but also the people who have discarded us and benefited from it. And it’s not as if they—the writers happy to have new books published year after year; the editors and agents who pick from the masses their few exceptional talents and feast on them, the literary press and book award committees with the word “best” on their lips and something like eugenics on their minds—know anything special. They have no secret knowledge about how writing is done or how books are made or distributed. All they have is money and the power of the colonial state behind them, through its institutional partners.

That should suffice for the why of the abolition of publishing. As for how, the following notes are a rough sketch that contains my own emerging understanding of the anti-press as a form of mutual aid that is organized around the production of writing by writers and readers working collectively for their survival and a total abolition of hierarchies. I encourage others to do their own writing towards the anti-press because there is no one vision for it: the anti-press represents myriad possibilities from below or none at all.

1. The anti-press is what happens when writers and readers who have no credentials, no authority, and no power decide to take matters into their own hands and simply help each other do the writing they've wanted to do and release it in such a way that sustains their lives, wounds the state by rejecting its hierarchies and organizing myths, and fosters connections with others like them which also brings the moment of liberation a step closer.

2. The anti-press forms among people with nothing, people practically living below ground, in and out of underground economies. Writers and editors who don't have nothing are free to organize themselves in different ways—by definition they have the resources for it—but their work wouldn't be the anti-press because they'd have a different relationship to the people with nothing the anti-press would call them to collaborate with.

3. Everything good about the anti-press (as I know it) the anti-press has borrowed from the underground economies of sex workers and trans women of color, of revolt and unsanctioned mutual aid, where the law is, "I accept nothing for myself that my sisters cannot also have / demand of me all that you do not have which is in my

hands.”

4. The anti-press by definition is opposed to power. The anti-press takes every possible step away from policy, away from deciding who is worthy or should be allowed to live, until its editors and editing itself become obsolete.

5. Abolition of publishing via the anti-press will work in parallel to and overlap with the struggles for a total abolition of hierarchies and will not be possible without (among other things) the abolition of prisons and policing. That is, the abolition of publishing without an end to prisons would be meaningless because that would mean a continuation of capitalism and the settler colonial state.

6. **Low intensity model for an anti-press**, which can be adapted or scaled up according to the specific needs of the individual/community³: A journal, magazine, newsletter, chapbook series, or press which would publish on a bi-monthly basis; every two months this anti-press would publish an edition of 150 copies to be sold to readers at a cost of \$5 each (plus \$2 for shipping); in order to sustain itself, the press would only need to sell 50 copies of each release every two month period until each release sold out or make up short falls through donations; this anti-press should start with funds in an amount of \$750 and would spend \$750 on the production and printing of each issue; the \$750 budget for each issue would be divided in

3 Through the Trans Women Writers Booklet Series, I'll be able to provide funding to trans women who are interested in starting their own anti-presses as of Spring 2020. The idea is to use the existing funding, printing capacity, and readership of the booklet series to help you get started; this might mean publishing a booklet about the anti-press where you are interviewed or given space to develop the vision you have for your proposed work, or it might mean paying you and your collaborating writer(s) to publish the first issue/release of your anti-press through the booklet series as a guest editor. [Author's Note: this is no longer possible since the Booklet Series ended in May 2020]

three parts, 1) \$300 for the featured writer contributing a substantial amount of writing, which could instead be divided among a handful of writers each contributing brief texts in a magazine format, 2) \$300 for the editor(s) who would coordinate, design, print, staple, and ship the copies or post the text online, and 3) \$150 to be spent on materials for each issue (paper, ink/toner, web hosting etc.); the plan being for the anti-press to begin with enough funds to cover the cost of its early publications without its editor(s) having to take on debt and to begin operating facing a low level of risk and pressure; an anti-press organized under this model would obtain concrete results in both creative expression and mutual aid (publishing a new release and making substantial author payments every two months) without ever having to expand beyond its own needs, seek grants, operate under a business license, court a mainstream audience, make a bid for popularity by publishing well-known writers, or otherwise compromise its desire for a new way of relating to others and a transformation of everything, everywhere, which is the anti-press.

TERCER COMUNICADO

DEL 2019

*A letter to trans women
writers, readers, & everyone
who might someday read, write,
& agitate alongside us
December 2019*

Was it the same with you, and when you were born your heart was a smooth speckled egg cradled by the red velvet lining of your chest, but at some point, and maybe you remember the exact moment, the you that was your center cracked and it spilled, which was fine (there was heat there, you discovered, that flared with every terror), but the pieces of shell were like cut glass pushing through your chest, they carved a path into the open air, and you understood something then with your hands running red and filling with bits of shell, that you were almost out of time?

That's how I've been feeling, at least. That I am running out of time. And that collectively we have less and less time in which to organize as the conditions we face worsen. That eventually there might no longer be any possible future left apart from those that lock us into complicity with genocide as the capitalist-settler-carceral state (and they are all carceral states; every state a dream built on violence) perfects the instruments of capture, surveillance, control.

Time then.

I'm writing this to say the booklet series may be coming to an end in the month of May 2020, as its second year of publication closes with a 24th issue.

If the series does shut down before a third year begins, it will not be because of a lack of funding. There is enough money for the series to keep publishing, but there isn't enough for me or for other struggling trans women to stay alive.

This is the problem: the booklet series is working in isolation, it has been for over a year and a half, and there's no evidence that this will change unless we take collective action. There's a lot more writing (and the desire to someday create writing) by trans women at the utter margins—those without prospects for publication through other routes, with as nothing of a future out of poverty/precarity before them as I have—than I can publish and pay for through the series. There just aren't any other place in or around publishing where the many of us on the outside can draw a paycheck and be treated fairly.

The series can't carry on steadily, year after year, while there is an absence of journals, magazines, and presses out there publishing trans women like we are. I can't survive in that environment. And I know what's going to happen if we head into a third year like this. As much as I hate the idea of letting the series grow without constraints in terms of print subscriptions, funding, and the amount of copies we print, I'd feel a tremendous amount of pressure to go that route. Because if it wasn't possible for me to publish more writers, at least I'd be able to offer expanded distribution and better payment. At the end of a hypothetical third year, subscriptions might increase by another 100 readers; the payments for each featured author likely increase to between \$500 and \$750; it wouldn't take long for the sheer amount of money behind the series to demand that I professionalize and spend increasing amounts of time on it and even expand into a larger physical space to keep up with the demands of that growth. What's more, it would be incredibly

easy, as time went on, for the series to benefit from increased visibility and recognition and become something of an institution, becoming the one trans publication that libraries or indie bookstores carry, the one trans publication that gets any press, and so on.

This might sound like the logical, natural progression for the series; after all, if there's enough demand for this work in the marketplace then one almost feels an obligation to follow that demand as far as it can go. Such few publications manage to succeed that it seems like a shame not to look past the issues at hand and simply, with complete fervor, pursue whatever literary scheme that manages to take off, right?

I want to be clear that I want nothing to do with that form of success. If it is a failure for the series to continue publishing editions of no more than 200 copies indefinitely and receive no press or awards, while other radical publications/publishers are able to flourish and work alongside us to support trans women writers, then I gladly welcome failure. I'd happily work towards a future where the booklet series quickly becomes outdated and winds down its work in light of an explosion of cheap, agile, specialized, militant, wondrous publications by trans women.

I'm here to call on you to help me fail: hold me to this vision of failure and fail along with me. Whether the booklet series continues on past May 2020 depends on our failing together.

Thus far, I have described an ethical, spiritual crisis facing the series. But the material crisis at the root of those concerns, the full challenge that I and other trans women face is far more grave. It's not just that the booklet series can't publish as many trans women as there are both writing and wishing to write at any moment, it's that these writers and I are suffering. We are unable to do the writing work we want to do, unable to do the work that remains to us, which we are still capable of in light of the ways that ableism, racism, transmisogyny, classism, and other violences have shut us out of regular employment in the

above ground economy. We are unable to organize with others since we cannot now make a living, we are unable to live at all—think of how many of us have not survived the lack of work that might have sustained them, and I may be another casualty. If there were more publications where I could publish consistently with trans women and get paid, it would greatly help me stay alive. I'd not only have access to a steady income and therefore steady housing, be able to access the health care that I need and not be forced to engage in sex work (which because of the toll it takes happens to make me not want to be alive). I would also gain access to a future—to the hope that there is something more than bare survival out there for me and for other trans women who refuse to leave our sisters behind.

I'm sending out this tercer comunicado in the hope that I am not the only one who desires this, hoping there are many more of us prepared to fight for everyone to have more, to have networks of care—ecosystems of mutual aid presses and writers unions and other, as yet unnameable, self-organized groups of writers and artists and readers that will rightly make demands of us and the world—that work for all of us. The hope is that the booklet series was only a beginning, and whether or not it continues into a third year that it will have served to bring closer a blossoming of similar publications. For the time that remains in our second year, I'll do my best to help trans women start new publications—please email me at berroujtj@gmail.com if you want advice or help towards this.

Many of our lives depend on it.

Yet, still this is not enough. I'll end this work with perhaps another beginning; an unfinished set of notes I started writing this summer/fall **towards a union of trans women writers:**

WE CAN'T KEEP DOING THIS ALONE. We've been trying to publish our way to liberation, but we didn't have an answer for the fundamental problem that for every exceptional trans

woman that's published or given an award, an untold number of other trans women must suffer. The truth is none of us are able to publish or succeed unless we accommodate ourselves to the demands and policies of a system of racial capitalism of which publishing and meritocracy are integral parts: demands like having a graduate degree, like having a certain amount of money to spend on writing, like speaking from whiteness or to a white audience, like not being too critical of the capitalist, settler colonial system or its functionaries—the publishers, editors, agents, and non profit grantors—that give us these so-called opportunities.

When we publish we cause harm, above all to the most marginalized. But if we worked with more intention, if we saw ourselves as responsible not only to everyone who is excluded from publishing (its jobs and money and the life sustaining access and status it can confer) but all those who are hurt by the violent structures that are made stronger and more effective by our participation in publishing, and if we organized as a union of trans women writers we could repair that harm. And more than that: as a union we could build new forms of (anti) presses and (anti) journals whose practices (for example, refusing curation, refusing credentials, refusing hierarchies) would be so contrary to meritocracy and other neoliberal tenets of publishing that it would be a way of working towards liberation rather than against it: a movement against publishing in which incarcerated trans women would be prioritized as friends and colleagues who were torn from us; and those who cannot publish or even afford to write now would be able to make demands of writers who are currently working or have enjoyed success; and writers without degrees or resumes, the unpublishable and the destitute, would be given material support not just to survive but to create the very anti-presses and journals that are needed in order for all of us to finally be able to refuse to give our work to anthologies and academic journals that do not pay us, to media sites that serve the powerful and constrain our visions

and do not pay enough, to the magazines and publishers that year after year make the same racist, misogynistic ‘errors’ and whose curatorial vision could fairly be described as white supremacist, to the non profits and independent presses that have entire fortunes and pay us, or rather only their most deserving favorites among us, pennies.

But what would a writers union look like? If the traditional function of a union is to allow workers to collectively negotiate with (and apply various forms of pressure against) their employer, how does that work with freelance and unemployed writers who, first of all, each have an assortment of different bosses from year to year and month to month, and, second, how would such a coalition of writers hold itself together when so many of us have not and will likely never have a chance to meet or take action together in person? What could a union do for trans women writers, anyway? And if the activities of a union are largely funded by dues paid by each member, where would this money come from when we’re talking about trans women writers who hardly get any paying work and most of whom live in poverty? There are endless questions; but here are some general principles towards one such union:

1. A union of trans women writers that will help fundraise each incoming member’s yearly union dues but then ask that they hold onto that cash, in case they need it, and that they simply do their best to pass that money along when another union writer requests assistance (like with paying rent or fixing their car) or asks for help funding a project that will benefit other trans women.

It should cost nothing to be a member of the union, even in terms of time; but there should be no core members doing most of the work, only ordinary members each asked to contribute no more than a small amount of time. The union itself will not hold anyone’s money. Writers who win awards or who receive payment from publishing will be encouraged to pledge

to donate a portion of that amount, setting it aside until another trans woman writer asks the union for money.

2. A union of trans women writers that will bring trans women with success (whose success we understand to result from an alignment with the interests of racial capitalism) within reach of trans women without that success (who refuse it or cannot attain it) who will have demands.

Writers with less access to publishing and awards (who are shut out of publishing due to racism/anti-Blackness, who do not have writing degrees, who cannot take the time to submit to contests or journals, who cannot afford contest fees, or perhaps cannot even afford the time to finish complete, publishable works) will be encouraged to demand that the writers who do have access, who are enjoying some level of success, pledge to donate a portion of their gains.

3. A union of trans women writers that will throw an editor out of a window if they take so long to pay a writer or otherwise mistreat them in a way that affects their health, housing, or sense of well-being.

Practically speaking, a union whose members will coordinate to take escalating levels of action in these cases. For example, first sending emails and making calls asking for prompt resolution on behalf of the entire union against editors/publications who mistreat writers; then, if there's no resolution and depending on the harm that's been done: applying public pressure on social media, contacting and coordinating further action with other writers who work with that editor/publication, and perhaps calling on writers and readers to blacklist bad editors/publications that refuse to repair the harm they've done.

4. A union of trans women writers that is able to demand

that other, non-trans women, writers and poets also unionize not only to help themselves but so they are at last forced to (a) recognize our demands, (b) redistribute the resources made available to them by institutions that condemn trans women, and (c) do the ongoing work with us required to dismantle those institutions.

Working with the understanding that it isn't enough for us to unionize and secure better working conditions and greater access to work for trans women alone. The violence of publishing will continue so long as, among other things, Graywolf Press continues to partner with Wells Fargo and the Poetry Foundation continues to be a \$300 million hedge fund and writing programs, archives, and journals continue to be situated in universities that gut communities through gentrification, policing, conducting military research, etc.—and ending that violence will require all of us to organize, not just the most marginalized.

5. A union of trans women writers whose membership is open to any trans woman who has ever written or wanted to write or might someday wish to write, whose membership is made up only in small part by working or published writers (though this kind of balance might take time to achieve since suppressed writers might be harder to contact and include).

Organizing trans women who are currently writing and publishing and ensuring better conditions for us is a start, but it is no more than that. The real struggle for a union of trans women writers will be to bring in all those who need access to these tools and resources but who are not already working in our circles. That is, poor trans women who don't yet think of themselves as writers or readers, trans women who haven't or won't take writing classes, older trans women who aren't part of the online communities where we currently are, incarcerated trans women who won't be able to find out about our efforts

unless we reach out to them, and every intersection therein. A union for trans women writers might as well shut down if it ever becomes a club for educated trans women who already get publishing work to simply get more of that work from cis editors when its radical potential lies in breaking publishing itself by supporting the creation of trans-led (anti) presses which work against hierarchies and extend needed aid and tools for liberation to all trans women who need it.

**Letter to the Friends
of the Poetry Foundation**

from poets who have been
working to destroy it*

July 2020

We write to you as poets who understand that abolition of the police and prisons will require a total abolition: the end of all institutions that profit from settler colonialism and the destruction of Black lives under racial capitalism, along with their collaborators. The Poetry Foundation, with a fortune valued at over \$250 million, is one such profiteer; and the poets who have accepted its fellowships, contributed to its programs, and published in Poetry are profiteers as well.

Our first demand is addressed to those profiteering poets: shut the fuck up. We haven't forgotten that each time we brought to light the violence of institutions like the Poetry Foundation in the past you called us crazy and shouted us down. And though your letter borrowed from the critiques we made, you still managed to be wrong: it's not just the Poetry Foundation that has to die in order for racial justice to become a possibility. Poetry and Poets will have to die with it.

We're talking about abolition, obviously. Not the murder of people who until a few months ago were still furiously trying to rationalize filling their pockets with the blood money of

these institutions while we were doing sex work and collecting food stamps to stay alive. Nor even the killings of the bosses who anoint them as Poets, lifting up one voice so they can profit from the destruction of a thousand others. No, we refer here to the abolition of the notion of the Poet as a genius, an exceptional person, someone more deserving of life than others: that the white supremacist fantasy of meritocracy must die alongside the Poetry Foundation. Though we do not discount the necessity of armed self defense in resistance to the violence carried out by the boards, investment bankers, staffers, and administrators which these poets serve. We'll save that for another time.

It's not just that the profiteering non-profits, publishers, and universities need to pluck a few tokens out from our communities each year to make themselves look legitimate -- after all, it takes work to maintain the fiction that these institutions weren't created out of massive amounts of ongoing violence (stolen land, stolen wages, stolen lives) and aren't still engines for recreating the white supremacist, capitalist, colonial status quo. And we do believe these institutions would be revealed as little more than racism machines if their marketing departments couldn't point to the subset of diverse collaborators they've curated during recent years as evidence of the opposite.

It's that merit forms the reverse side of justice: the same idea that there are exceptional people who, having met the proper requirements, are more worthy of life than the rest of us requires us to believe that there are others who are less worthy of life by having failed to become fully human. They're two sides of the same eugenicist coin. Both notions are fundamentally anti-Black. We know it's all bullshit when merit, with its advanced degrees and prestigious journals, has a white face and justice results in Black people being disproportionately surveilled, imprisoned, and murdered.

We think it's a problem that essentially only white people with MFA's (along with a small subset of tokenized people of

color, also MFA recipients) are allowed to publish poetry, have access to any form of publishing, or have their written work acknowledged in any way that improves their life chances. We say, abolish it all.

Boycott the Poetry Foundation. Boycott the New Yorker. Boycott every literary non-profit. Boycott every foundation. Boycott every publisher and small press. Boycott the writers who've taken money from these institutions and who refuse to share the risks involved in destroying them.

Boycott the university as well. This isn't a joke. Taking money from a university is taking money from the police.

How long are we going to pretend that universities don't have their own private police forces? That they don't raise funds for their local police departments, the way the University of Pennsylvania has donated money to the Philadelphia Police Foundation each year, recently helping Philadelphia Police specifically with the purchase of new guns and drones for the SWAT unit. That they don't collaborate with and provide support for police operations, like when Drexel University's own police department helped Philadelphia Police tear gas the residents of 52nd street in West Philly on May 31st. That they don't provide research that aids the systems of policing and incarceration, the way that the risk assessment tools developed at Penn by criminology professor Richard Berk are used to keep people in jails by lending legitimacy to the inherently racist practice of bail. Universities have always been the police. Abolish the university because reforms will never be enough to divorce it from policing.

We'd say, "Set up the picket lines!" but there are no unions for poets are there? We'd say, "Let's take all the money we pay in workshop, submission, and contest fees and use it to form unions and give unemployment payments to everyone who needs it!" But there are a lot of us who didn't have the money for any of that crap before the pandemic hit, anyway -- and are the poets who have more money than us, even if they don't

have much, going to be willing to include us in their unions if we can't pay our way in?

Look, we can have unions and we can have the death of the Poetry Foundation, the university, and the police. We can have everything if we commit to a radical transformation starting with ourselves. If we work collectively and prioritize the poets with the least. If we figure out how to read and teach poetry outside the university. If we develop techniques to pry money out of the hands of comfortable writers, editors, tenured professors, and staffers who, though they may agree with us, still will not act to help us survive. If we are willing to cultivate an anti-work culture that will see us put less time into our writing and more into stealing what we need to feed and house the poor.

No more submission fees, no more contests, no more trying to publish in prestigious journals or presses, in fact no more prestige, no more slush piles, no more trying to publish in places we don't read ourselves, no more publications that don't regularly publish Black people, no more all-white editing staffs, no more secrecy around how much and when publications pay, no more books or publications that poor people can't access, no more literary agents, no more reading writers with literary agents, no more publishing MFA recipients until at least 2030, no more reading publications or people that carry out these harms against us.

Though the form of publishing the profiteers have been practicing continues to work against the movement for abolition, the collective action and refusal to collaborate with power that we have described instead offers us a chance to fight for abolition. We have been engaging with publishing as mutual aid, and in our isolated efforts at supporting the uprising we've found there is a vast unmet need for printing and design at the front lines. And it's here that we could be marching most effectively with the protesters, looters, homeless encampments, eviction defense crews, and Food not Bombs chapters.

By building community printing cells in every city -- nothing more would be needed than to get a handful of writers with printers and the means to distribute copies together in a Signal chat to carry out requests for free printing from local groups. Or setting up art and design workshops that could create free posters, websites, and social media graphics in partnership with these same groups. Or using the small press capacities that already exist within our networks to help protesters bring their actions, communications, and demands directly to the public in the form of zines, books, and posters rather than leave it to the police reports, newspapers, and TV stations to misrepresent them.

We expect nothing from the profiteers.

To our comrades, we look forward to organizing with you in the unions, printing cells, and anti-publishing collectives we've been dreaming of together -- we only hope they'll arrive before we perish in the struggle.

**This letter was cosigned and written with help by Isobel Bess.*